Marrakech, BCE

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Summary

The swords master had chastised them for flashiness at times, for bravo and showing off in ways that were dangerous, but Han refused to stop having fun in his spars. The moment it became work, it became too much, their lives. The school was a good place, a merry place, but perched on the edge of mania almost. They were men who lived training in hopes they would not die in the place of another man.

In theory it implied virtue. As Han threw open the tent flap and pulled his gloves from his hands, he supposed it must not matter too much which of the duelists was a sinner or saint. In the end, if the most virtuous swordsman was picked to back the blackest of heart, the gods would see him die.

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There is never just one lifetime, not for people who are meant to meet. In Will Graham and Hannibal Lecter's case, they shared five. Four which they could not share fully, and one which they did. This is one of them.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

The practice yard is as hot as what he imagines the underworld must be like. Heat radiates at the edge of their sight lines in the mirage of liquid, and it makes his throat feel dryer still. He had stayed longer than he intended at practice, as Han very nearly always did when his freeform spars took him against Will. They were well matched, and there was something to be said about crossing blades with someone who knew you so well, with someone whom one trusted.

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The gloves go onto the table, and he takes his time in the tent entrance, blocking Will's congress with his body in a playful sort of obstinate. The shade is perhaps 20 degrees cooler and they both have sweat slick skin, both radiating heat from their exercise. He waits until the man grows agitated with his dallying -undoing the buttons of the brocade coat that protected his skin from the sun during practice in a leisurely fashion, before Will finally shoves him further into the tent to take some shade for himself.

"Impatient," Han scolds, in an amused tone. But when the flap closes again and drops the tent into darkness for their sun dazzled eyes and cuts off the furnace pouring in from the sunbaked sands outside, it is a relief.

“Vexatious.” Comes the reply, along with a half-hearted swipe at the back of Han’s head. Will is exhausted, even growing up in the sun his entire life this seems extreme. Or perhaps Morocco just enjoys vindictively tormenting them, it’s not the first time the thought has crossed his mind. he forgoes the careful undressing and only undoes the buttons he needs to get the jacket and thin shirt over his head and to a pile on the floor.

“And concupiscent.” It’s less an accusation than a start of a gentle word volley. They’d been made to run drills for most of the morning into the heat of the afternoon. Then singled out to work on technique in pairs. Technique that involved, more than anything, Han’s clever footwork getting him out of otherwise very shoddy sword-work. Running a sword up and slowly down the edge of another does not a winning duellist make.

Will stretches, splaying his fingers in the gloves before removing them as Han had and sitting on the edge of the bed to work his wrists in slow circles. They had long since removed gloves to bloody palms, now there were just calluses, surprisingly smooth. Hands that appeared older than their owners.

"Concubinous?" Hannibal asks, upsetting one of the camp's cats from where it has settled amongst his clean clothes. The pun is a bad one - he doesn't know the meaning of the word Will had tossed at him. His early education had not been quite as elevated, not that Will would benefit from his knowledge. He would do better to forget the schooling, but the man held firm to it. He reaches back to bind up his hair and get it off of his neck, watching Will stretch himself into long lines.

He drinks directly from the pitcher, but offers a glass to Will instead, knowing how the man preferred to hold onto his civilities. When the other accepts the glass, Han sinks down in front of him, watching his throat work and the irritated expression cross his features as he tucks himself against Will's knees.

"No need to be so cross," he suggests. He had won, despite his refusal to cease playing at deeply suggestive swordplay. Han knew that the other's irritation would give him a competitive edge - just enough to get away with prolonged toying. He waits until Will is swallowing before he reaches for the laces on the other man's pants - perhaps to see if he'll lose enough focus to cough water.

Though he is very tempted to pretend to and upend the rest of the glass on Hannibal's head, he doesn't waste the water. Instead he shifts into Han's touch enough to make it clear he knows where this is going and that he is more than happy to oblige. Can't think of a time he hasn't been, since this whole thing started.

"I'm not cross, I'm thinking." He replies at length, drawing one knee up to rest his boot against the bed. He leans back enough for Han to follow and, with a smile, trickles the last few drops of water down his spine anyway, watching the muscles work in response. "What could I possibly give the victor that he doesn't have already?"

"Hmm," Han makes a considering noise as he reaches up to curl one hand behind the heel of Will's boot and help him draw it off, without so much as the barest protest for the water sliding cool down his back. then he helps with the other boot before joining Will on the soft, elevated bed. "Have we already worked our way through the entire list?"

It had not been a competition between them for a long time. Obviously when they practiced neither held back, but they were evenly matched enough for the fight to go either way. In the ring they were ruthless, enduring the longest hours – sometimes by choice – to hone their technique and practice with a challenging partner. But in here, where the tent flap closed on their shared space, it had never been a battle. A tug of war, perhaps, but never violence unless passion dulled all other senses.

With the amount of blatant teasing, Will isn't sure he can quite put his finger on what Hannibal wants from him today. It hadn't been a dark enough implication for full submission, not quite playful enough for dominance. They're both so tired Will's uncertain they can do much beyond press together close enough to lose themselves and rock, shallow, sweet thrusts that did more than even their most active games had.

On these days when they had spent hours in the ring, it was the most satisfying end they could ask, anyway. Han settles his weight comfortably after twisting and kicking off his boots in a lazy, ingraceful way that spoke more for efficiency than any care as to what he looked

like accomplishing the act, and then he sinks down, settles his knees against the undersides of Will's thighs and crouches over him, as if in claim or conquest.

Will runs his hand through Han’s hair and gently tugs the tail he’s tied before returning to scratch his nails over the scalp, a silent request for elaboration. He’s happy to go along with anything, semi-hard already after the teasing outside, but a victory’s a victory.

Reaching between them, Han settles his palm over the thin fabric of Will's unders as if considering, rubbing along the side of the man's cock through the fabric as he considers his answer. It was always this way - who won, won. It was a simple wager with what little they had to offer. Duelists pay in favors, as the saying went. Will was a competent enough fighter that Hannibal believed he'd never need the man's favor in the traditional sense of the word, nor the other way around. Instead, they were one of the company's open secrets. Everyone knew, certainly - no one would deny them the luxury.

"What should I ask for?" Han asks capriciously, with a faintly playful smile that gives way as he leans up to press a kiss to Will's open mouth, a quick thing, a promising thing. "What would you have, if you'd won?" His fingers make no sign of stopping, the motion coaxing but almost absent. He's rarely in a rush.

Will hums, a low contented sound and shifts back enough for Han to have more room to be comfortable. It's such a comfortable, practiced movement, and just as Han's hands don't still against him, so Will's don't still in their exploration of his shoulders, back, down his arms and back up again. Han has always been stronger, bigger than Will, but that didn't stop him beating the man frequently in the ring and taking his pleasure in here. Though it was less taking and more sharing, if both were honest, and they tended to be in this line of work where any job could be the death of them.

"In this heat?" he asks, drawing a finger down Han's jaw before turning his hand to run knuckles down his neck, "I wouldn't ask for anything active. Something lazy. Perhaps endurance," he cocks his head, smile crooked but genuine, eyes already hooded and comfortable, "Perhaps quick recovery. But I know you ask for my voice."

Will moves his feet to rest flat against the bed just on the inside of Hannibal's calves, their legs tangled together gently even in the position they were in. He draws his hand lower, over the sweaty collarbones and down to thumb a nipple idly.

"But you could always surprise me."

"I often do," Han agrees, wondering if his fairer companion will ever grow used to the heat. The red swath of his neck suggests perhaps not, and Han soothes his mouth over the edge of the sunburn, where the high collar of the man's coat had saved some of his soft skin from the sun's assault. Will was often the one who would cite rules and prior combat examples when Han did something unusual in the ring. Once, when he'd climbed halfway up the wall and caught his hand in the support that held up the tented ceiling, it had brought the whole mass of fabric down on them. That had been a surprise.

He doubts that Will wants a similar one here.

Without shifting very much he arches his back, reflects the lazy motion of Will's fingers against his chest with his tongue in a deliberate way, tasting the sweat over his collar bones, down his sternum, and then allowing a faint scrape of teeth over Will's nipple in place of the calloused pad of thumb.

He sits up and lays the unlaced pants open, pushes underwear out of his way, and curls his fingers on Will's hardening cock. Will had always been responsive, ever since their constant challenging and barely veiled flirting had tipped over the edge on the excuse of a standing bet.Finally he decides he's not satisfied with this arrangement, after a stroke or two, and he instead pats Will on the thigh twice to catch his attention. "Get these off," he says, because he's the winner and he's earned the right to make Will struggle with his own trappings.

Will hums again, raising his chin once in half a nod before catching Hannibal's lips as the other had caught his, a passing, fleeting, promising thing, before untangling himself from their comfortable, sticky arrangement and complying. At least in the heat of summer they were spared the requirement of leather pants. He doubt anyone would be able to actually fight with the fabric constricting so in the heat. So the soft cotton comes away easily, Will not making the effort to look graceful or particularly alluring with the gesture.

He drops the fabric over the side of the bed and returns to kneel in front of Han this time, smile lazy and promising and slow, hands sliding down much as Han's had before to cup between his legs, thumb gently stroking the sensitive skin above the waistband.

"Would you like these off too?" he asks with a gentle cock of his head. He enjoys Han like this, when they're both so worn out that their movements are slow and heavy and skin sensitive from the work outside. Not that he doesn't enjoy him when the man pins him - of Will him in turn - or when they can't keep their hands still or their lips coordinated enough to do more than brush and share exhales. The bet he lost he still considers the best investment of his time he's made at this place.

"Yes," Han answers simply, reaching out to run his fingers through Will's damp hair and then leaning back on his elbows so he can lift his hips and make it easier for Will to comply. Han is hard in answer - he finds his body responds even to the suggestion that Will was turned on by this point, that with one ready, the other only needs that knowledge and they aren't far behind.

It can be a blessing and a curse.

As Will hoists himself back up onto the bed, Hannibal slips the sleeves of his protective coat, laying atop it instead, and he reaches out to pull Will against him, enjoying the feel of his taxed, sore muscles and the bruises from the days of work behind them. On their sides, front to front, Hannibal reaches up with one hand to tug at Will's hair until he arches his neck, and he closes his teeth gently on the pink sunburnt skin under his chin.

"How tired are you?" he asks after a moment, pushing his knee between Will's thighs to bring their hips closer together and give them friction against each other.
Will moans, a quiet, tired sound, and smiles, hooking his leg around Han's hip in turn and resuming the gentle explorations of his chest his fingers had started. In truth, he's exhausted,

sure he can sleep for a week if it was offered, but knows that by the time the sun goes down, in the dusk, he'll return to practice again.

"I can keep up." he replies instead, an answer to the challenge as well as a blatant challenge of his own. He shifts to duck his head, feeling the way Han's fingers catch in his hair as though deciding whether or not to allow the movement and choosing to, and kisses him. It's a gentle, familiar, comfortable thing, common between them and welcome. He insinuates his fingers between the tie in Hannibal's hair and his scalp and just holds there as he starts a gentle grind with his hips.

The movement is easy, they're still covered in sweat from the work, and know each other's bodies well enough and intimately enough to know just how to shift to elicit a response, to garner a bite or a cry or a tensing of muscles.

Letting his eyes close, Han leans into it, keeping his movement slow and rolling. It's warm, it would be uncomfortably hot save the thick tent overhead shielding them from the sun and some of the heat. Han curls both of his hands at the back of Wills neck at first, and holding, tipping his own head back and letting his eyes close.

"It's very distracting when I think of you like this," Hannibal tells him, finding it a little easier to confess, following it with a groan. "Or I can see the flash of your throat breathing hard and think how often I have been the cause of it."

Will grins, moving his hand to curl around Han's back now, lightly running nails over the slick skin there in meaningless patterns. He knows, of course. Half the time he does it deliberately, suffers the sunburn afterwards but can see how Han's glances linger at his throat, at his wrist if his sleeves are loose and slid up his arms, at anything he sees that suggests this. Han is far too put together in practice to be so blatantly teasing, unless he uses his sword. And then it's far beyond Will to resist him.

Han finally insinuates a hand between them, though the other does not cease to hold Will against him. He curls his fingers around both of their lengths, to increase the pressure, to hold them together so they are both thrusting against each other and into the circle of his fist, and Han sighs happily into it. Will was gorgeous when he let himself be distracted - both in sword play and here.

"Whatever were you thinking when you bet against me?" Han asks, and it's a common question. A call and answer, though the answer changed. He pushes harder with his hips, a more insistent motion that leaves them both distracted now, as Will's hand joins his curled around them. He groans again, deeply enjoying it.

"Was thinking I'd win," Will replies, a groan cutting his sentence short as he lets his eyes close and his head duck down to rest on Han's shoulder as he moved his hips to match the pace and pressure, fingers weaving with Han's for an easier grip. "Knowing you would instead, and wanting to see what you'd do with the victory."

He remembers how much he'd wanted this back then, before he knew it was mutual enough to be a constant offer, something that others envy though they never spoke about it. Will has always looked far more submissive than he is. His personality is too instinctive, too

impulsive, to be completely submissive. And no one who had tried to wheedle his way into his bed had considered that, and left them both unsatisfied when he proved his worth. But Hannibal had come in, approached him a way one would an equal, and the resulting teasing and taunting and skill with the blade had set Will's mind on edge.

He'd taken the bet in anger, had spent that night in a similar mood, and had woken up with Hannibal's limbs tangled with his own, sated, comfortable and far too happy for his own good. He bites his lip and moves their hands tighter, twisting on the upstroke that sends them both into breathless, needy sounds that they don't even try to muffle.

But it isn't enough, Han wants Will pliant and loosing his voice without much care for who heard, wants the both of them to sleep as they don't often get to - deep and tired and satisfied. "Where did you put...?" he asks, but his voice trails in distraction. Likely the slick oil they use is where Han left it, as he's the one who often forgets when in the heat of things.

"Under the window," Will replies, voice unsteady but the smirk underlying it very much obvious, "Your side of the room. As always."

It would require him to move, much as he did not relish the thought. Hannibal gives them a moment of tighter pressure, allows Will to repeat the motion that had set them both to needy gasps, and it does not fail to do so this time, either.

"So far away," he laments, rolling his hips into the next motion of hands, and then finally deciding to tear himself away before time and this pleasure take any plans he might have had for them. Han disentangles himself, and shifts toward the edge of the tent where one side of the bed rests up along the canvas cloth wall, and slides his hand down into the space between the frame and the tent side.

The oil is made from almonds, and still smells vaguely sweet. Han does not drop the entire thing into the bed sheets this time, but he gets enough for what he needs into his hands and when he returns to will, he drags the other man on top of him, laying himself back so he can see the sensations write themselves over Will's face as he prepares him, reaching up and pushing slick fingers against him, teasing against him more than seeking true entrance just yet.

His other hand almost - almost leaves a slick handprint on Will's thigh before he remembers himself and instead of reaching for his own cock, he transfers enough oil to Will's hands so that he can do the job himself.

The move is easy, willing, and Will straddles Hannibal comfortably, knees parted more than they really needed to be to make both access easier and the view more enjoyable. As Han was visual, Will was verbal. He could have the man talk him close enough to beg - in any language the man knows - just as Will can spend an entire day in practice doing nothing more than rubbing his neck in a tired gesture, or undoing a few more buttons to get some air on his sticky skin. It's a game both enjoy and both know how to play very, very well.

He lets the oil slick his fingers, run down between the knuckles before finally turning his hand to slick Han up, slowly, as carefully as he knows Han will prepare him, enough to make the man groan and shift impatiently. This gift of impatience Will earned, carefully, sneakily,

and it's his biggest victory no matter who holds the title in practice during the day. He leans forward, before Han's started preparing him, and draws his lips over a nipple before biting it lightly and sucking the skin around it. He flicks his eyes up to watch Han watch him and grins, tongue a dark, red line against otherwise pale skin before he retracts it.

"So no surprises today?" he murmurs with a grin, clean hand moving to Han's hair again to tug it lightly. Will doesn't need surprises. His entire life is surprises. From finding himself in Morocco in the first place, then the school, then Hannibal. He's happy with this constant, with the promise of intimacy and kindness, the mutual giving and receiving of pleasure that he would have with no one else. So he doesn't need them, but from Han they are always welcome.

He ducks his head to give the neglected nipple similar treatment as the other.

"Nnn," Han answers at length, after an intake of breath. "How do I surprise someone who knows me so well?" He had no taste for unpleasant surprises, and they had explored every option their limited means gave them. Besides, he was too impatient for true creativity.

Pushing two fingers in at last, Han watches Will move against him, and supposes he should make the man endure a little before he takes him. They have come a long way - from near antagonism when they were both younger, both new and scared of what this life could hold for them, but they had fit together like a matched pair, even in opposition. This is better.

Han hooks his fingers down toward himself, and feels for the change in texture inside Will that suggests he's found what he's seeking - in combination with the sudden intake of breath and the way Will shifts against him and then goes still, as if to keep Han's fingers just there, and he rubs, coaxing, pushing until he's sure Will must see sparks behind his eyelids and his breaths are helpless gasps.

He's never stayed just here, Han thinks, as he spreads his fingers and pushes to either side of Will's prostate, until the other has cum. The desperate noises fanning over Han's chest in gasps of hot air encourage him now, to try. To see how long he'd last under so direct an assault.

It's dizzying and so, so good, and Will just stops to feel it, to let himself enjoy it, to show Han he was. His body starts to tremble, to respond to the onslaught of pleasure that's making him see stars. He knows the helpless little sounds are his, not Han's, he knows the way he's arching and writhing but staying rather still nonetheless is exactly what Han wants of him, and feels a warm pleasure in knowing Han is enjoying this, enjoying the changes in expression and movement.

And it's relentless and Will wants at once to shift away and stay as he is, to bring Han as close as he is to the edge and torment him there too, but it's not his victory today and he endures the best way he knows how.

"Han... don't..." it's a whimper, not even strong enough to be a request, he slides his body over Hannibal's, chest to chest, and

kisses him, hips finally working in a slow gentle rhythm against his fingers.

"Don't... don't I want more..." more than this. He has stamina enough, can recover a few times if he has to but he is so tired, wants to just press Han's body into his own and take them both so close to the edge they have no voice.

Much as it was his victory, his choice to do exactly as he wanted under the terms of the bet they've always had, Han has never been much able to resist Will's requests. He wouldn't deny the man anything, as little as he has, what small space is his in the world, he has always shared willingly with Will. He eases off, though the trembling, the helpless needy noises were intoxicating, and he could see every effect he had play out over Will's face without a single distraction.

"Alright," he says, soft, reassuring. There is the promise therein that he could push Will over now, if he wanted, he knows he could, but he won't. He slides his fingers free, and pushes their mouths together again. "Sometime," he promises, between how their mouths touch, as Will gets a grip on Han's cock and guides him, and he has to stop speaking because it's so good - nearly as good as feeling Will push into him helplessly had been, just a few seconds ago - and will get better yet. "Sometime, remind me to finish that."

Will smiles, his laugh slightly breathless as he lines Hannibal up and slow, gently, begins to sink back.

"Nnng when I'm conscious next," he promises, lips parting on a moan just as he knows Han will suppress his when the pressure hits the right level, "Then I am all yours to torment."

He wanted to see Will come apart with nothing distracting him, from so close a vantage point - to feel the way tremors overcame the man's muscles. This is - this is the slow stretch, as his hands settle over Will's hips and he arches his own up. This is familiarity, the way Will opens and welcomes him, the way they have grown used to each other. It's tight and the sweat that springs up on Han's shoulders now is cold and electric, and the last inch he completes with shallow thrusts, slow, but insistent. With Will over him, Han has to bite his lower lip, pull it between his teeth and press down on it. The picture is pleasing.

Thick lashes slide low toward his cheeks leaving only the faint shine of moisture to suggest his eyes were still open at all, his mouth open and soft, pliant on the expressions and sounds that overtook him. His shoulders were rounded into the task, muscled from sword work, shifting as he moved. Han could watch Will forever, or at least as long as they have.

Will stills, for just a moment, when he feels Han in as deep as he can go. He nuzzles, gently, to get the man's head to tilt up, to brush their lips together and share an exhale neither can suppress. He smiles, slow but wide, contented, and tightens his muscles around him before slowly easing off again, the movement deliberate, but refusing to move out of the close embrace.

He sets a slow pace, feeling Han hit deep and perfect against him with every slow thrust, enough to have him writhing again, enough to have his cheeks color, lips part, and the quiet needy sounds to return. He curls his arms under Han's head, tilts his own to suck a gentle mark just under his jaw, not one that will stay, just one that he'll remember next time Will's blade rests gently against the spot in his victory. Then he pushes away, up, hands on Hannibal's chest as he gives him a smirk, rolls his shoulders and raises himself on his knees before lowering himself faster, harder than before, but still slow enough to drive them both to whimpering impatience.

It's likely that the next victory will be Will's, if this doesn' t count as one for him anyway. Hannibal is usually easier to take off his trail of thought when he's still savoring memories of his last victory. They are too evenly matched, otherwise.

Han is tired, and this is perfect for it. The motion is smooth, and slow. Deep, tight - perfect. Letting his hands wander up Will's sides, Han's fingers grip just below the blades of his shoulders and hold, leaving marks with his nails, shallow impressions of white on skin that reddens so easily in the sun.

He wants to say something, but there's nothing to say - all his usual verbal spurs have abandoned him, and when he opens his mouth it's on a quiet, needy sound, a warning that he is close, before he sits up, props himself up on one elbow and curls his other hand around Will's cock, stroking him in time, trying to rush them both to the edge and over - the time for teasing is past, and the immediate relief would be blissfully welcome in this situation.

As he tips, he pulls Will down to push their mouths together, to muffle his own sounds against Will's teeth and stroke him through his own release, until it's uncertain which of them is really making any given sound. They fade as the pair eases against each other, tired and sated, Han tracing idle patterns against the man's back with faintly wet fingers - they'll require a bath before evening practice anyway.

"Will," he says gently, closing his eyes and turning to almost nuzzle against the man's cheek, as they catch their breaths. "I'm going to remember you promised to let me torment you."

“I’ll make sure you remember,” Will murmurs back, kissing Han’s cheek gently before easing off him with a quiet sound and shifting so they’re both lying on the bed, on top of the covers as the heat continues to relentlessly beat against the tent and the sand outside.

His orgasm has rendered Will almost completely incapable of speech or movement, but he reciprocates the touches, curls his fingers lightly through Han’s hair, down his arm, encircling his wrist and sliding his palm over Han’s hand. His eyes are closed, but he knows him well

enough by touch, has touched him so often in the dark he knows how to find him to hold him, to warn him, to just touch him…

“You can torment me tonight,” he promises, smile melting onto his face before he just sighs, exhausted and happy, “Might not wear a shirt for practice…” he’s not sure if it’s an empty threat or likely a reality. If the heat keeps up, the twilight won’t help them, the ground will force the heat upwards regardless of whether the sun beats down or not.

He rolls to lie on his stomach, turning his head to rest against his arm as he watches Hannibal through barely open eyes. if it was colder he’d be on top of him. after a moment he uncurls his arms and rests his hand on Han’s neck, tugging just enough to shift him closer, lifting his head to kiss him where they meet. It’s a slow and sloppy thing, speaking more of reassurance and adoration than anything possessive. When they break it he shifts enough to rest his head on Han’s shoulder, arm still across his chest, providing as much contact as either of them can bear in the heat.

Han yawns, curling his fingers against Will's side in reassurance. In the heat of mid-day neither really needs much shared heat, but when the sun sets and they've finished practice, the night will grow cold enough to drive them together beneath the heavy furs that they will kick off again come morning. It's a routine that has become comfortable, easy.

The same way they duel, they live. It's not as bad as it might be, the notion that they would live to fight for another's honor, integrity, or innocence given this. Hannibal trusts that Will feels the same way - or at the very least relaxed enough to sleep beside him, calm and quiet and half filthy.

They sleep in a heavy pile, and ease closer unconsciously as the hottest part of the day fades.
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Awakening is a rude thing, instead of their usual soft drifting into awareness, the assembly bell rings and clatters to call for a lineup. Han groans and growls his way awake, momentarily disoriented. He'd rather push his face into Will's neck and pretend he never heard it.
Will wasn’t dreaming, not that he was particularly aware of. But he was certainly dragged out of rest by something he would rather not hear. He responds much as Han does, curling to insinuate himself closer to the man as though it will help matters. The bell does not stop ringing.

"Will they notice if we decline to appear?" Han asks, and presses his mouth against Will's neck. Of course they would. Hannibal currently occupied the first rank, and Will safely occupied the fourth. They traded, often. It was safer not to be first and second. The bell continues its insistent nagging, and Han finally decides he'd better set about finding his pants.

“My back will notice if I decline to appear,” Will notes, voice fringed with annoyance as well as amusement. Punishment was not something he received often, he’d learned quickly. He makes a discontented sound as Han extricates himself and just lies there, cheek against the space Han had warmed just seconds before. After a moment he moves to dress as well.

He supposes – considering how unexpected and unwelcome the wake up call was – they will be forgiven for forgoing a bath. He doesn't, however, make good on his threat to go shirtless, not to a lineup. He pulls on the undershirt and tucks it in enough to be passable. The sleeves are loose and hanging over his hands but he doesn't bother adjusting them. He does, however, catch Han by the tent flap to kiss him again, a quick reassuring thing.

"Not quite the torment I had planned for the evening." He apologizes, tilting his head a little, "But they might award you with a useless honor and make your victory legitimate." He winks, lewd and amused, before passing through the flap and out first.

"I expect they'll just take the top seat away from me again," Han answers, an amused smile on his face. It was all part of a great game to him, as it always had been. "Just to keep me working hard enough to earn it back. Having flexible motivation is better for morale."

The school varies in size depending on demand. Unlike most marketable things, its population decreases as demand increases, not the reverse. It currently houses thirty-four students, aged from twelve to forty – Will has been here eight years, Han five, and never has the school seemed so empty for a lineup. It's become a trend, in Spain, to duel. Unfortunately as quickly as men jump to throw a gauntlet, few can stomach the follow-through.

Will gathers his hair at the nape of his neck and ties it with a cord, much like how Han had it before they went to bed, and makes his way to his place. It's very late afternoon but the sun refuses to sink, low on the horizon and hot as the morning. He exchanges looks with some of the men, smiles at a couple, and pointedly avoids glancing back to where he knows Han stands in line. Their activities may not be hindered or forbidden, but they were above parading their private affairs in public.

At the front of the ranks, Han has to stand with his sword presented, a thin sharp sabre wrought well but plainly, and the curve rests over his shoulder as he stands straight. His hair is worked back again in a messy queue that sticks at awkward angles behind his neck - it's long enough to think of cutting. Long enough to perhaps be a hindrance were someone to take it into their minds to grab a handful in spar.

He and Will both watch with attentive eyes and sinking hearts as the schools coin men emerge, toting a customer while the duelists stand at attention. The man is round, though not massively overweight, with soft hands and deep sunk eyes. His clothes are richly done, but loosely worn. A merchant, like as not. He has shrewd eyes, and though neither he nor the master of coin in charge of taking payment for services speaks either of the languages that Han does, it is clear enough that the man wants a proctor. A champion to prove his innocence in combat or perhaps to defend his virtue from the suggestions of his peers - taken to the ultimate level. Someone will lose their life for this man's honor. He has not dueled to first blood since his first year, when the restriction on his service kept his price low, and the threat above his head for replacement of his services.

The merchant will want the most his money can buy and more than his money's worth both. He will pick from the front rows, a thought that makes Han's heart sink. The top spots were prohibitively expensive, the men that occupied them were commodities that were expensive to risk in battle. Of course it was expected they'd win and return, but there was always someone smarter, stronger, faster. Perhaps the man would seek a better value in the further

rows, knowing the fighters there would cost less but feel far more desperate and fight harder. He stands straighter, as if his height could block Will three rows back.

Eyes fall on Han, consider, pass on - then return just as he feels safe to exhale. Words are exchanged, Han called out. He drops to one knee in the dirt as he'd been taught, lifts his sword with the blade balanced flat on both hands, and places his life in the hands of the merchant. There was still chance for a refusal. still the option that he might displease the man, but instead the merchant picks up his sabre in clumsy, thick fingers. The man tests the weight of the blade, and then grips it tight, works his other hand through the dangerous ponytail at the back of Han's head and tries to cut the dangerous thing off. He rips more of it out than he trims, but the idea is made plain.

The tie and tail lay in the well trodden sand, and Han returns to ranks, heavy hearted, and waits to be dismissed. At least it was him, quiet and confident and willing. Likely to return. He would face a stranger from another school - it was the ultimate in bad form for both parties to hire from the same, but not unheard of. Not impossible. It was why he and Will stay so separate in the ranks. It had always before been the first and second of schools forced to face each other in the sands. The distance made them safe, or so he thinks - but the line is not dismissed.

Another coin counter. Another customer - sparer, thinner, sparser of clothes but haughtier. More pride. He speaks the same language as the first - surely not. Surely their masters would not allow. Han turns his sword point down and drives it into the sand, the way he has to, to indicate he is already chosen. But the rest of the field stands in line beside and behind, and he must keep his eyes forward to be sure not to indicate Will to the man, even subconsciously.

The entire ordeal is quiet and formal, one Will has stood through countless times. He hadn’t been high enough ranked, perhaps in the high twenties, with Hannibal beside him, when two of the boys from their school were bought. The top two. The best. It had not been a fight to the death, just until one was too weak to fight the other; a fair fight but a brutal one. And despite trying, both of them, to not get better, not get good enough to stand in the front ranks, they both had.

Will watches the first merchant choose, purses his lips in silent anger as he inevitably decides on Han, the best, without looking twice. It shouldn’t worry him when Han stands again, sword planted in the sand in front of him. He’s a brilliant duellist, not counting Will and some of their masters, he has never lost in practice. But his heart starts to hammer, eyes sliding down to the cut hair in the sand. They should have broken rank by now. Dismissed. Han free of obligation and chores until the day of his duel. But yet they stand.

The other man takes his time deciding, letting his eyes run over each duellist, starting from the end no one of the man’s standing would consider, and moving up to the front. No one seems to catch his eye, even those their masters recommend – albeit reluctantly, they seem more tense than the boys that they’ll be catering to both parties today. Will watches, letting his eyes take the man in, assess him from what little he has to go on. He doesn’t break rank, doesn’t even move beyond tilting his head enough to see him before he comes directly into his line of sight.

William has never backed down from direct eye contact. He doesn't seek it, but like any animal, once it's engaged he doesn't let it drop. It's pride, foolish, stupid, young pride. It's one of the things Han has commented on before, laughed about as he calmed Will's fierce need to defend himself with a hand in his hair or a knuckle running down his tense spine. And even now Will doesn't look away, doesn't give the man any reason to pass him by, and he pauses longer, regarding Will carefully as the other just waits.

It's agonizing and the silence that's fallen around them is more suffocating than the heat. Every practice has competition, those older resent those younger that outrank them, but there is no true hatred in the school, no true animosity. And they know, they all know what Han is to Will, what he has been for years. So no one speaks, and no one intervenes, and Will waits and hopes and prays that this passes him over.

The man lets his eyes run over Will's frame, note with a frown that he is shorter than the duellist his rival has chosen, note also how Will doesn't look away, how his light eyes track every movement, how very slightly, just the space an inhale offers, he shifts back when the man steps closer, keeping their distance the same. When he meets Will's eyes again, Will can't help the way he shakes his head, just once, minute and nervous, like a twitch more than a full motion.

But the man doesn't move, does not change his mind, and with a quiet breath, Will sinks to one knee.

Han should hold form, should stand staring forward, resigned to what he has already been chosen to do, He should stand immovable, but he can sense the man in proximity to Will behind him, and he turns his head in time to see the tail end of Will's challenging stare. He recognizes it, he has seen it directed at himself many times. Here, it falls on a stranger, the enemy of the one Han has been chosen to proctor for. Even the coin counter has gone stiff at the notion of how this is playing out.

If his turned head has garnered a scolding from the master, he doesn't hear it - though certainly everyone else does. His eyes have only one focus, and his understanding of the situation is limited but it is clear enough. The master's words turn sharp when Han lifts his palms from the downturned blade and lets it fall to the sand, and he is almost unthinking when he sinks down. Dimly, he is aware that outsider eyes are watching and that he will bring disgrace to the school. That it might seem cowardice, that he will pay for it with a striped hide.

Not quite the torment I had planned for the evening.

"No," Han begins, as two of the usually silent masters descend on him angrily. "I refuse, I reject - I won't." It's childish, he knows it is. He knew this could always be a possibility, but it was so remote, they were so careful. This never should have even come close to him. Hands under his arms haul him to his feet, voices tell him to pick up his sword, stand and do himself honor and finally he does, finally he shuts his emotions down and sags into the grips hung under his arms and pulls himself straight again. It won't be enough to save him from reciprocative punishment, and the silence in the arena is deafening. To endure it, Han stands with his head forward, a stiff tight line from neck to tailbone, and keeps his eyes closed.

The rest are dismissed, now that the proctors are chosen, even Will - only Hannibal must remain to answer for his lack of discipline. He is as still and silent as a statue as the others file out, save the deep breaths that he takes in counts of ten, to save himself another loss of face. What he had done would reflect badly on the school, and he regretted it, but that did not harden his heart to it any more than the knowledge that he would not be able to escape it.

It's his back that is striped and bleeding when he returns to their tent in silent misery, his heavy protective coat draped over his joined hands, and he tries to gather the courage to enter, as if pushing the tent flap aside into what had once been their safety and escape, and finding only the inevitable would make it real.

Will can hear him breathing, not ragged but not steady, and looks up. he doesn't move to open the flap, however, doesn't rush Han in choosing when to come in. he'd listened, as he supposes everyone had, when Hannibal had been chastised, punished. He hadn't risked more wrath on the man by intervening, it was never smarter, so he's left the tent instead to gather a large bowl of cool water and a cloth before returning with them to wait.

And so he waits now, hands clasped between his knees and eyes trained on where Hannibal stands.

Eventually, there's the quiet shuffle of moving fabric as he pushes the flap aside to step in, and Will sits straighter. He'd gotten fifteen lashes for his trouble, more lenient than it would have been had Hannibal not been chosen to duel; he needed to be able to move to bring the school pride now that he'd shamed it. for a moment Will does nothing but watch him, the tent is dark enough that details are washed aside, but he can see him well enough, can see that his head is down, his eyes more so. Then he stands and moves close enough to take the coat out of his hands.

They're both quiet, both thinking too much about the duel ahead and simultaneously forcing themselves not to. But Will isn't sure he'll be able to forget how Han's voice sounded when he'd sunk to the ground and refused, how he'd looked when he'd been lifted back to his feet, limp as the shirt between Will's hands now that he gently peels off his damaged back and sets aside. He coaxes Han to lie down, stomach against the cool sheets of their bed, and wrings the cloth out before starting to clean him up.

It's a slow process, a delicate one, and Will takes his time with every cut, to dab it clean until the blood isn't oozing from it, to squeeze more water on top to clean it out before patting his skin dry. halfway through he moves away to light a lantern and set it on the floor at his side, then he kneels again. by the time he's done, it's cold enough to warrant a cover. He's not sure how Hannibal will sleep with the damage to his back but he's willing to freeze with him if that's what it takes. He leaves the tent to pour the soiled water into the sand outside and leaves the bowl tilted against the side of the tent to dry.

He kisses Han's shoulder gently when he returns, the undamaged skin still slightly damp from the water, then lower, around the damage and over the reddened skin, then closer still, lips brushing the cuts but not pressing to hurt. He moves his hands to gently untie Hannibal's pants before moving to remove his boots and slide the fabric away. Han doesn't even move, doesn't look up when Will undresses himself, just as carefully. It's cold now, with the nighttime over the desert, but he doesn't slip under the furs, just lies next to Han on his side.

“You spoke up,” he murmurs, just watching his face in the flickering light of the lantern nearby, “Fifteen lashes for six words, Han, why?”

Han looks wrung flat, though he hadn't so much as moved or flinched - Will was gentle enough, his pain tolerance high enough. Now, he reaches - already misses the contact. "When we cross blades we can trust each other."

Han curls his fingers around Will's and shifts, endures what laying on his side brings to pull Will's chill, pliant body against his own. "I'd rather turn my sword on myself than let them take that from us." This fight, one of them would be hurt at the very least - likely badly. Hannibal restrains himself, as he knows Will is, from considering what will happen if the fools want someone to die to prove their sides in whatever the quarrel was.

The pain would leave the other shy of it, would render one of them responsible for the other's agony when they have always been very careful to leave nothing lasting. Han has seen duelists lose hands and limbs entire, has seen them live through what should have killed them to spend the rest of their lives in agony, retired and turned out - with honor, but nothing to feed themselves with. He had seen minor injuries fester and go foul, and never had he been so afraid of it.

"Six words of truth," he sighs. "I don't want to do this." He curls his arms tighter around Will, not protective - the man was as good as Hannibal was, easily. Better on days when he wasn't distracted. But it's affectionate and almost needy. If it comes to it, he couldn't face this tent alone - there was a time perhaps when he could have. Surely the masters, the school owners would not allow a duel to the death. Surely no amount of money could convince them to turn two of their valuable properties against each other when the youngest recruits would not be ready to step forward and fill the holes.

Will doesn’t reply, allows himself to be drawn into Han’s arms and just rest. He can feel how hard Hannibal’s heart is beating, despite how calm and cool his words are, how collected he had seemed in the lineup, and Will knows his own isn’t much slower. He’s fought before, they both have. To first blood mostly, once their skills improved they were kept from the minor challenges and trained for the higher ones. Will has ever only fought one duel until one was too injured to fight back. He’d come out mainly unscathed. Hannibal had fought two.

It’s the worst sort of terror, knowing that he could inflict that much pain on someone so dear.

He stops the thought of bringing death to the man holding him, the man calming him and treasuring him, by tilting his head and kissing him. in the silence and the dark they will bring only shadows of nightmares of what’s to come. He needs to distract himself, distract Han enough with something normal, something kind and desperately needed. So the kiss deepens, becomes more urgent, more teeth and harsh breathing as he threads his fingers through Han’s hair – the ends jagged and uneven where the merchant had deemed fit to adjust him – and grips. He shifts just enough for Hannibal to straddle him, to get any pressure off his back, and then pulls him down again.

The motion makes Hannibal's breath stutter against Will's mouth, but he doesn't draw back, doesn't do anything but lean desperately back into the kiss and he curls his hands in turn against Will's neck and keeps them together - though skin grows hot against each other and

every motion reminds him of his back, Han doesn't want any of the thoughts that threaten him should they stop.

He doesn’t care if this is all they do, for hours, until their minds exhaust themselves and they fall to slumber. He doesn’t care if there’s more, now, as long as there’s more tomorrow, the day after, for another four years and then some. He doesn’t care about anything but the fact that Hannibal is above him, breathing, heavy, hot and alive in his hands. He breaks the kiss and tilts his head back on a gasp, hands sliding from his hair and avoiding his back, sliding down his sides instead.

This is different from the gentle affection they'd shared earlier, a desperate thing that lacked their usual playful understanding. The notion of choice and reward and making the most of their small, earned freedoms. The lash was no punishment at all, when Han considers they could have rewarded his bad behavior by forbidding this, instead.

Pulling Will closer against him, Han makes a soft noise, pushing his hips down against Will's in whole hearted agreement. They should forget, they should forget any way they could, because otherwise they'd lay with open eyes and either cry or go mad. Neither needed that weakness right now. When they finally break, Han lets out one desperately soft sound of laughter.

"What shall we bet on this?" he asks, trying desperately to keep it a game - it is the only way they'll stand on the sands and get through it without dishonoring themselves and their school There was no option to simply not do it - if the duel itself was possible death, refusing it was impossible - they would both be hanged for cowards, left perhaps as examples - though in their case perhaps simply their bodies ushered away to prevent any possibility of martyrdom.

He reaches and shifts Will's hand up onto his back, letting him know he needn't avoid it - that for now it was just another sign that he was here and alive, and that he would not let their actions hinder how they touched each other.

Will shakes his head, forgetting a moment that the point was to forget, to normalize everything they could control. But Han's breath against him is hot and perfect, his smile evident in the tone, as desperate as it is. He ghosts his fingers up his back, careful not to pull the cuts and open them again. He doubts, though, that he'll have even this much control later.

"You wanted me to remind you," he breathed, spreading his legs around Hannibal and hooking them in a way as to coax the other to do the same, "That your terms for the last bet still stand." That he had wanted to watch Will come apart, watch him hold himself back until he couldn't anymore, and then meticulously break him again.

"Oh yes," Han agrees, in a low tone, purring and quiet. The anticipation has a harsher edge to it, a bitter desperation. "Where did you put...?" But he remembers the answer from this morning, all those lifetimes ago, and slides his hand down between the mattress and the tent wall, beneath the darkened window. While he's shifting, he pauses to snuff the lantern.

He doesn't answer as to the terms of this coming duel. He doesn't know what he'd give to any god that listened for them both to be alright. Doesn't know what he can give Han or ask of

him that they don't already share. He arches up and kisses him again, open-mouthed and sloppy, and keeps one hand against his back, splayed, as his other moves to stroke Han up.

Mouth falling open as Han sits up, his breath trailing on soft, unusual sound - needy, desperate little things that Han seems to be closing his eyes into - rare that he lets himself even be audible, but some combination of the sensation of hot, injured skin under the smooth, cool, strong palm and Will's insistently coaxing fingers leave him unable to focus enough to keep silent - a trick he usually employed to be sure to hear Will's cries.

"Winner sets the terms post duel, Han," he reminds him, a crooked smile on his face before he leans up to gently tug his earlobe with a hum, "As always."

"Not the first time," He reminds, but he trails for a long moment, as if perhaps in prayer for the very same thing. He hopes his terms will not have to be 'Don't go', and he growls frustration at the intrusive thought, and continues. "The first time I laid everything plain before we started."

His fingers circle and circle, and then press for entry and receive it. "I thought for sure you would turn me down, and take every foolish notion out of my head. Oh, don't slow-" Will obliges him, and he arches his back, curls his fingers inside Will as he had earlier and seeks. "Then I worried you had heat stroke and weren't hearing me at all."

Han laughs in a low tone, and some of the bitterness has fallen from him in turn for affection. He had never thought to be given this, not even when Will did not sharply rebuke his flirting. They had both been so cautious, careful around the other. The bet - made when they had both had copious amounts of fine wine after their graduation from initiate - had simply been the excuse they needed.

Will stops a moment, smiling at Han’s pleading sound, before just changing his grip and returning to the quick delicious pace Han had so demanded earlier. It was difficult, though, to keep it constant, with the way he was being stretched and teased, Han avoiding his prostate but making it very clear he wouldn’t be in the near future. He arches, lips parted on a gasp, and smiles.

“I was so angry at you.” And it was true, he had been so angry. Angry at how easily Hannibal held his attention, how good he was with less training than Will had gotten at that point, how smug he was, and how absolutely irresistible to Will, “I think it was vindictive… to see you fight… to beat you… and then to give it to you anyway, but my way, not yours… and you won.”

Will stops, for a moment, body tense in pleasure as Hannibal begins the slow, gentle teasing with his fingers, so soft it’s barely there but so good Will can barely breathe already. He sighs out a quiet ‘oh’ and twists, shifting closer to Hannibal’s hand, bringing up his thumb to stroke it over the slit just enough, feeling the man shudder above him.

“And you weren’t gentle with me… you didn’t treat me like porcelain… let me fight, held me down… we’d had so much wine…” Han’s fingers push a little more insistently and Will mewls, twisting his body against the bed in a configuration that can’t be comfortable but feels like just what he needs right then. “And you stayed… you stayed till morning…”

"I could hardly have been asked to move," Han suggests, his tone breathless with pleasure, though not quite as gone as William was. He shifts to lift his knee under Will's thigh as the man twists and raises himself, to brace him up and let him keep the position since it opens Will so nicely to Han's attentions.

What a morning it had been - Han had woken with a dry mouth and a pounding head, sore everywhere and the only mercy there had been was that it was their one rest day in a week so he could hold pathetically to Will through all the man's irritation and press his fevered forehead against the cool skin of Will's belly.

The next time, neither had needed wine to be brave, nor make an excuse. They had simply let bluff and bravado (and memory of how pleasurable the experience had been, even fumbling and quick as it had been) carry them through. Han smooths his free hand over the tense muscle in Will's stomach, feeling him winding up, enjoying hearing his voice climb into whimpers, without even having to curl his hand around him like Will's hand is curled on Han's cock now, though gone still with distraction. Han doesn't mind, it's almost as good just to hear his every effect, see Will's expressive features crease and beg as clearly as his voice might have.

"You didn't throw me out, like I had expected you might," Han says, leaning down, pushing Will's leg up further, and not teasing now but pushing with enough delicious pressure to have Will seeing stars, to ride him right along the edge until he goes over it. "I had thought you might wake disgusted. I was trying not to drink so much I would not have been able to talk you out of it," Han pauses on a soft noise, a laugh. "I wasn't very good at knowing my limits yet."

Will is too far gone to hear him, to understand his words, he just feels. Feels the way he's being worked up, the way he's arching off the bed in such a way as to make his only anchor points where Hannibal holds him up and his head as he arches it back. One hand is back in his hair again, tugging it impatiently, the other resumes the quick stroking of before, pace erratic but felt. He's trying. What he isn't trying to do anymore is keep his sounds low, keep them guarded and private. He's loud and needy and he doesn't care.

He hadn't thrown him out. he'd woken up with a whining, heavy man on his chest whimpering about the sunlight, and it had been the most unbelievably endearing thing Will had ever seen. He'd played at annoyed, but stroked his hair, offered him the pitcher of water, the entire time pretending like he didn't have a headache bad enough to rattle his own head open. After that it became a game. After the game it became right. They had been sharing a tent since the start, since they'd graduated and been moved from the common tent to one that slept between two and three people all over the school. They had this one, and for four years it had been truly theirs.

"Han –" it's a plea, a warning that he's close and barely able to keep his head. He pants as Han's fingers withdraw for a moment, just stretching him again. he's dizzy, from the heat, the emotional upheaval, the unbelievable hands of the man touching him. he's just barely settled his breathing when the fingers return with the gentle coaxing, teasing play against him. Will moans, a low, loud sound and very lightly drags his nails over Han's cock before resuming the lazy stroking.

Much as it was a game - and a dangerous one, given how they found themselves now in threat of opposition, they had made each other better. The constant challenge had meant they enjoyed their practices, had felt victories more keenly, had driven each other to be better without having to truly suffer for it.

"Go on, Will," Han answers, and he curls his other hand around Will in much the same way Will was coaxing him, only his voice descends into a growl of pleasure when the other whispers the sense of nails over him, just the change in sensation suddenly letting Hannibal realize how truly close he was, how near the edge had crept under Will's insistent, if distracted touch was, and he pushes his hips into it, gets them both lined up against each other and joins the efforts of their hands, and it's not long after that, not long at all.

He had wanted to see Will come apart, but he had forgotten how strongly the man seemed to pull him after, with all his gravity. That his enjoyment of Will enjoying himself was nearly as sexually charged as touch itself, and it leaves Hannibal gasping his way over the edge, surprised by it. He knows Will is there with him - just ahead or just behind, it hardly matters. There's nothing for the moment but the two of them and the sounds of what they do to each other.

When he is sure they are done, he settles on his side, wincing, instead of directly atop Will, but doesn't move any further away from the man. His hands are sticky and wet, he settles them at the man's sides instead and pulls him up close, holds them tight together in desperation, but there is nothing to say. They both must hold to something, or they will fly apart.

Han tries to let his mind stay quiet as long as he can, but it turns and struggles against being still. Finally he sighs, presses his mouth to Will's in a soft, apologetic kiss for his restlessness. "We should bathe," he suggests, and then. "It will be cold."

Will, in reciprocation, wraps his arms around Han’s neck and just holds on, one hand sliding into his hair to gently massage the scalp, the other skirting gentle fingertips over the cuts in the smooth skin of his back. He doesn’t want to let him go either. He knows they have another day, just one, in which their new masters want them to train separately and prepare for the dawn duel the morning after that. He knows that they have this night, and the night after, and he is terrified that his mind doesn’t instantly offer that they have the night after that as well.

“I’ll take cold.” He murmurs against him, bringing their lips together in a gentle push. Cold will be feeling something. Cold will be proof of life. “We won’t be cold for long after anyway.” And it’s not suggestive, not remotely teasing. He’s too tired for that, on every level. Emotionally, physically, spiritually tired. One piece of news, one tiny gesture of going down on his knee for a man who could easily sell his life for nothing, and he was exhausted.

“It’ll do your back good.” He adds, not making a move to pull away to get moving, and not blaming Han for staying as he was. And they stay, for what feels like moments, hours, before Will kisses him again, deep and slow, and finally gets out of bed.

Han groans as he follows, the stretch and pull of his back drawing what would usually be a fluid motion up short. The lashes were half what he would have gotten were he not chosen. A

down payment. He will pay the rest after the duel - if... He will pay the rest after the duel. He does not bother to dress, simply recovers a scratchy linen towel and the thick white bar of soap. Han makes an absent gesture, as if to tie up his hair and finds it in short, ragged ends instead.

It will grow back, he tells himself. The merchant needn't have worried, his opponent would never have fought so dirty as to grab it in anger - he was far too fond of touching it in passion.

The water is cold as they slip into it, and he hisses as it touches his back, but it will keep the sweat and oil from the cuts, and when he gently washes Will's hair, the cool seems to fade, the world turns quiet, and for a moment, his thoughts are still. They will sleep until the dawn, and then train - perhaps even through the hottest part of the day, depending on how they perform, and then one more evening.

Will enjoys the gentle fingers in his hair despite the freezing water and obediently tilts his head back for the soap to be rinsed from it. He returns the favor, careful to keep the suds from hitting the cuts on Han’s back, before using his hands to sluice the sweat and dirt from Han’s body, gentle and quick; the temperature was not getting much more bearable for him.

Han wants to say, I'll throw the fight. They could make it look good, anyway. No one would know or guess. Instead he resolves that if it is a fight until one of them cannot get up anymore, or any of the crueller forms of duel, he will lose it. He is taller, he does better in the heat. William is not weak or frail, but Han had a better chance to survive anything terrible in this climate.

The resolution might allow him to sleep. More likely, the solid quiet form of Will pressed against him will remind his body of its instinct to sleep as the other slept. He had always responded well to conditioning.

They dry quickly and return to the tent, both too worn out now to worry about the duel or think much on it. Will pulls back the covers and lets Hannibal climb in first as he shifts around to set out clean clothes for the morning, bundling their used ones to wash later. When he climbs into bed he doesn’t face Hannibal, just crawls in next to him, back to chest, and pulls his arm over to rest against him, pulling him close.

He doesn’t say anything. Doesn’t bring up more memories, doesn’t ask why this is happening, just curls his fingers with Han’s, brings his hand up to his lips and kisses each knuckle in turn. Then he sighs, rests their joined hands against his chest, and closes his eyes in sleep.

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They are called to training apart, sparring with masters instead of other students. Han's slow and distracted, the muscles in his back are stiff and no amount of chiding or warning blows brings his mind back. He tries to find hope, tries to reassure himself that it cannot be that much of a risk for the school. The masters are no fools - they know William is as much an

asset as Han is, that the constant fluctuation in performance is not due to inattention or flightiness.

They would not turn a chance for a loss in the school into a certainty. It's the only hope he can find, that weak faith in their superiors. Han has never minded knowing that his death would likely come on the sands, or that perhaps Will's would first, but as their years here went on, as they advanced toward Mastery - William was only two years away from the safety of teaching - it had felt less and less real.

Now, as he spars through even the hottest part of the day because his masters refuse to dismiss him until he can find his focus, he finds some small hope. That perhaps tomorrow evening they will have injuries to tend and that is all. With that, focus returns. He is dismissed for dinner, but he delays. As much as hope allows him to continue functioning, it is no excuse for being unprepared to be wrong.

Duelists fight with two weapons - their swords, whichever fit them the best, from the short leaf shaped blades that had recently become popular to Han's sabre, or the thin long blades from spain. Their offhand carries a parry weapon - a shorter, blunter dagger that catches and holds the advancing blades of their foes. It's the only protection they are afforded in the ring, save skill. They practice in heavy protective coats and thick breeches, in the ring they wear only thin silks in their schools colors. William will have to be in alternates, so that the contestants are easier to tell apart for gods and men.

But at their belts, they keep their mercy. More spike than knife, the blades had one purpose. For that, Hannibal has never tolerated the idea of allowing dullness in the blade. Today he sharpens with single minded purpose - to put it past wickedness. Sharper is kinder. He returns it to the sheath and does not think any further on the matter.

He does not find Will at the tables, and supposes the other has found himself distracted as well - or has finished his supper already. He sits, and pushes his food back and forth. The other duelists try briefly to wish him luck, to encourage, but his usual easy assurance and cocky smile is too hard to come by. Just two more years, and Will would have been safe. Three after that and Han too, amongst the ranks of instructors. Was that too much to ask the gods?

Will had trained all day in anger. His blows with the practice sword had been vicious, he'd been chastised for stepping outside the safety practices with the real blade and he'd been dismissed – then forced off the sands – by early afternoon. With nothing to do, Will's hands were shaking. He had too much energy and nowhere to put it. he wanted to be so exhausted by the evening that he just collapsed into sleep and blocked everything out. it would be unfair on Hannibal, but if he let himself linger on the thought it would only get worse.

He finds himself eating with the teachers for the afternoon meal and goes through the motions completely numb. Whatever he ate, he doesn't remember, and it hardly matters when he throws it up almost immediately upon leaving the tent. The day passes very slowly after that.

Will decides to skip supper, stomach still in knots after he'd begged and pleaded for another few hours of practice, and returns to the empty tent alone. It shouldn't be so overwhelming

but it is. The silence, the space… it hits Will harder than he thought it could and it takes a lot to not sneak some wine and get completely drunk for the night; the dawn is already too close for Will's liking. He takes the towel and soap for lack of anything else to do and leaves the tent again, needing space and company.

The water, this time, is warm. And Will takes his time to wash his hair, his body, to just soak in the water as it takes all the pressure off his muscles, seeps it away. It's dark by the time he ventures into the tent again, muscles loose and hair dripping into his eyes, and this time he finds it not quite as empty as he'd left it.

"You're sunburnt." He murmurs, offering a small smile. "Did they make you train through midday?"

Han has stripped down to just his pants, skin tight and hot in an unusual way. Han rarely suffers sunburn, but here it creeps well down his shoulders over the red, healing cuts. He hadn't noticed, aside from in a vague, distracted way. He glances up as Will enters, and exhales, feeling relieved without truly understanding the trigger for it. He had been reading - in truth the same passage nearly fifteen times - off of one of the clumsy wax tablet copies the camp kept to teach duelists letters. The poetry is Catullus, but it does not hold his eyes or thoughts.

"And beyond," Han agrees, clicking the wood lined wax codex closed. "I had no focus today."

He does not need to elaborate. He doubts William has had much either, though his skin looks a shade less dark than Hannibal's, so perhaps he had at least spent the hottest hours indoors. "Master Petrous left a host of new bruises that did little to improve my concentration."

He sets it aside and eases to his feet, having already stripped his boots to bare feet on the worn rugs that the tent floor had covering them. He wondered who would occupy this space after they did - another would eventually be promoted. There were always two in a tent.

"I hope your practice went better," he suggests, as an attempt at levity. Will needed it no more than he did. They were enemies in intimacy - each knew every small flaw in the way the other fought. In spar, it was a joy to be strengthened that way - but when the threat was a real one, Han isn't sure how it makes him feel. He wants to reach out, but he does not.
Will watches him, notes the tension in his shoulders, the way he carries himself heavily here, not as gracefully as he does in practice. Notes, too, how he seems reluctant to touch, to stroke his hair from his face as he usually would. He understands why but it aches nonetheless.

"They had to force me off the sands," he replies with a weak, small smile, "I think I left enough bruises on my own to make up for yours." He tilts his head and sets the towel away. He knows, in this moment, how he could lunge at the man to overbalance him, how he could pin him using his own strength against him and go for anything from a hit to paralyze to a hold to kill. He steps closer and instead draws a cool hand over the sunburn that fades gently over the front of his shoulders to his chest.

He wonders again if they could turn the tables on this… they were the talented party in this situation, had been hired to fight, potentially kill, another person for the whims of men who

could not fight themselves. If they so chose, they could dispose of the cowards and leave, perhaps get quite far before they were stopped; they were good enough.

“You might have the advantage tomorrow,” he says finally, glancing up with a smile, “I doubt I’ll be well-rested.”

"One never-ending night must be slept," Han answers, distant in his way. But his hands come up and cover where Will's touch him and he finds a smile to answer with. For all they did not owe the school, he finds he would not dishonor it. They owed it as much as their lives, as unfair as it was for them to ask for the price to be paid this way. "I won't sleep either."

He lifts one of Will's hands and presses Will's fingers to the spot under his chin where Will had bitten, close to his pulse - where he might press the blade of a sword. "We'll sit, I suppose."

Guiding Will he does not go to the bed, but rather a further corner where pillows stack, where they had sat long ago when they had distance and daring instead of intimacy. He settles, then Will settles against him. "It is just another duel," Han sighs, but his tone is shaky and he can't make eye contact. "That's the only way to face it."

Han's fingers lift and trail through Will's hair, as they sit and wait for dawn. The hours will crawl and fly both. He wishes he knew what to do. Let it only be to blood, they would survive that stronger. Then they could forget this misery, and need only survive two more years, two short ones, and there would never come a time when they need cross blades for anything but spar.

"Consider your terms," Han suggests. It isn't quite a warning of what he intends, but he realizes it could be too late. He glances back at Will and tries to make a jest of it. "Something such as this calls for creativity."

They will sit and wait all night, in thought. Perhaps a few moment's diversion to what the winner should be owed would spare them that. Then Han is still for a while, quiet as the dawn creeps closer. In the end he does sleep a little - or perhaps it is better to say his consciousness fades into that space between sleeping and waking, with his temple pressed into Will's shoulder, and his breaths slow and even.

Sometimes, Will thinks absently as they’re both roused just before dawn by gentle hands and quiet words, it’s best to not sleep at all. He knows he dozed off for a time, but can’t remember when and how long for. All he knows is the panic creeping up his spine, and the almost painful, childish urge to hold onto the hand still around his middle as he stands up to leave the tent. He manages a quick squeeze of his hand, one look, and then he leaves.

It’s dark outside, and cold. The horizon still black, offering perhaps an hour to get ready, to prepare however they can before the sun rises and the duel begins. He takes up his sword from the master at arms and just nods when he’s told to concentrate on his footwork, ‘because you tend to misstep when you’re defending constant blows’. He puts down his shivering to the cold of the morning and to nothing more.

He dresses in the fighting silk slowly, taking time to adjust every drawstring on sleeves and pants, to stretch his feet in the boots before tying his hair back. They're not his clothes, they're no one's and everyone's. His are the darker of the school colors, a rarely-worn set as few people hire from single schools for a duel. They smell foreign and don't warm to his skin.

The sky is very dark blue and lightening when they leave the tent, and Will stops, sword dragging on the ground, and swallows.

"It's to first blood," he murmurs, "Please, it can't be more. Surely one merchant can't wrong another for more."

He gets no answer but a pull to walk further. The panic rises and he forces his breathing to match his slow steps.

The Arena is smaller than the sparring sands, and ringed round with seats. Their fellows sit in silent respect around the circle of stepped seating, and in the center of the ring stands the Arbitrator, the one who begins and ends the match, who calls foul when it needs to be called. At either end the Merchants stand, quiet and solemn. Their fates ride on this, too, though to a lesser extent. They will not be the ones bleeding.

Han was chosen to proctor first, so he appears first on the floor. The silks are armless, tight so as not to hinder, but colored for clarity of identification. In this case, it is necessary. His sabre is sheathed, and opposite the parry knife and mercy hang in parallels from the sword belt. In the duel, they wear no armor - skill on skill. Han's eyes are dark and distant and resigned - but for a moment, when Will steps opposite an Han draws his sword to salute, they are desperate.

They hold, as they had been taught a thousand times - as they had broken a hundred to tease and tempt and ever so gently break the rules while their instructors sighed and corrected them, but here they hold.

The Arbitrator calls for silence when he already has it, perhaps as habit. He introduces the combatants in the tongue the merchants speak, entreats the gods, details the case. Han does not understand a word of it, cannot even shift his attention to try and find cues in the expressions of those around him. It startles him when the man lays his hands over the backs of both their swords and draws them down to cross, and pronounces the terms.
Then again in the tongue spoken here, and the shocked noises from their fellows almost drowns it to his ears, almost renders it impossible to understand. To blood, he tells himself, only that. But the look in Will's eyes, the outraged sounds that are quickly over-run by the masters shouting for discipline tells him better. They are both still when the fight starts, the arbitrator removing his hands and releasing them to find the answer for the merchants with their blades.

Han closes his eyes, but finds he is only numb. It's alright. He had already been prepared for this, deep down. Now all that is left is the show. When the silence is truly deafening, in the moment of tension before they are both scolded, Han begins to move, to push Will back off his balance so that the other will begin to react instinctively. His eyes open, the fight begins.

Ad mortem.

It’s a practice, just a practice, and Will throws himself into it as he does any other, choosing to play off Hannibal’s strengths to draw him close enough to attack back the hardest. And it’s a game still, another match to show off footwork to the younger boys, to be used as living examples of how to hold the dagger for defense and how not to. Will holds it in a way that’s unusual but proven effective, so his technique was teased but not disallowed. The blade rests down his arm, the only armor he allows himself.

Their blades are quick, clashing but not hurting, working on their technique rather than to harm the other, and for a while it’s easy. Simple to pretend like nothing is pressuring them, until a voice, harsh and foreign, rises above the shuffling of their feet and the clang of metal on metal and Will misses a step, ducks, and their easy rhythm is gone. He’s rewarded for his lack of concentration with a thin cut against his arm, carefully around the blade he holds there for protection, and then Hannibal steps back, as is custom in a first blood fight.

It doesn’t hurt. He’s had far worse, but the feeling of blood sliding over skin makes Will realize how real this is, how inescapable. The look on Hannibal’s face is agonized, like he would rather have slashed himself than done so to Will. Will meets his eyes, offers a tiny flash of a smile – it’s fine, scars heal – before rolling his wrist and lunging forward again.

They drag the fight out, make it last as long as possible, but the tension is palpable, Will can taste it as easily as the sand on his tongue, and it angers and terrifies him. Do men expect so much blood? Of men that don’t belong in this ring, don’t belong in this fight? He narrowly avoids a blade to his side – another lapse in concentration – and parries Hannibal’s blows enough to compromise the other’s position, to get him to lean closer, just enough, for him to rest his blade under his chin, skirting the mark he’d left. For a moment neither move, if Will presses harder he’ll sever the artery, render the fight complete, but he doesn’t.

And in the moment of hesitation, Hannibal reacts. Perhaps it’s instinct, perhaps a plan he didn’t quite measure the distance of in his fear, but the blade lands just under Will’s ribs and cuts deep. His cry is louder than he expects, and higher. An innocent sound of someone who hasn’t been hurt often, who isn’t used to such unexpected blinding pain. Will drops his dagger and staggers back, blade raised and ready, free hand pressing to the wound. And this cut hurts. This one has him terrified.

Han's sabre hits the dirt, bloodied to a depth of inches. His reaction had been instinct made real, without a thought given spare, certain that Will would complete his cut rather than take the strike, as anyone might. There is a clamor above and around them, but he does not hear it or heed it, instead he reaches, covers Will's hand with his own as if he could take the strike back.

"Shh," he soothes, trying to have a look, praying it isn't as bad as he knows it to be. His instincts are far too sound - that Will's should have been just as such. He can see the fear, the blood, and hear the way Will's breathing is changing, even as he turns back toward the Arbitrator, desperate for the man to put an end to this. Surely this was enough, surely this was close enough to death. He meets stony disapproval, even as he pulls Will closer to himself and looks for mercy up at his masters, up at the merchants.

Surely they can see that this needs to be over. He is desperate for it to be, but there is no sympathy where he needs it. The masters look disappointed, the merchants hard, the arbitrator gestures that he should continue, and with Will whimpering against him, Han's arms close tighter about the man, protective. How much blood would be enough? How could they ask this - didn't they know that this was why you didn't chose both sides from one school?

He is resolved not to give them their satisfaction. He holds Will up gently, softly. But tight, reassuring. "Can you get my knife?" he asks, in a tone too low for the rest to hear. He does not care anymore what they need to know from this. Whatever they are fighting to decide. He hasn't since they uttered the words 'to the death'. They are a set - the death of one is the same as the death of both, and perhaps it had been for five years entire.

Will goes against him as instinctively as Hannibal had lashed out, resting his head on his shoulder and biting his lip to keep the pained sounds at bay. It's deep, he can feel his fingers press into the wound without trying and it scares him. he knows it's a mortal cut, he'll expire within a few hours without medical attention, and he doubts he'll get any. They can call the fight done, can give him the last few hours to die in peace, but he knows they won't. they want a spectacle.

He's shaking, whether from blood loss or fear he isn't sure anymore, but when he reaches for the knife as Han had asked him, it's to cut a quick, shallow bite against Han's arm, enough for the man to let him go, and shakes his head. If they end the duel any way but the proper way, the victor is dead. Hanged for dishonor, flogged, it doesn't matter, it's a death that won't be envied, and Will refuses to see Hannibal suffer.

He tosses the knife to land blade down at Hannibal's feet and raises his sword again, swaying but steady enough to hold. When Hannibal doesn't move, he lunges anyway, curving the blade at the last moment so as not to kill the man, and against duel regulations brings up an elbow to hit him hard against the jaw.

"Dammit, Hannibal," it's quiet, a hiss and a moan of pain in one, "Just end it. Cut my leg, fell me, it doesn't matter but if you don't they will kill you."

But he knows it's as simple as asking for the moon. If their positions were reversed he wouldn't harm Han either, he would be unable. He swallows, shaking his head slowly and looking away. Ad mortem. They'd get their show. He pulls his own knife from his belt and presses it into Hannibal's hand, blade cutting his fingers lightly before he withdraws them and sinks to his knees, sword tossed aside. Defeat.

After a moment, he looks up.

Hannibal is sinking down with him, very slowly down to his knees. Now his blood touches the sands too, but not nearly enough. There are two knives, and he has taken up both. He can see William hasn't sharpened the one he carries - his optimism had been stronger.

"They've already killed me," he tells Will. His mouth stings from the elbow jarred against it, but he barely felt the cut in his arm. He is as scared as Will, though his shaking is invisible until he gathers Will against him again, and presses his mouth to the man's neck. Into his

injured fingers he presses Will's knife, takes up his own. The arbitrator is withholding judgment, in some merciful favor - perhaps assuming Hannibal will still finish it - after all they now each hold a knife.
He guides Will's hand to press the blade against his sternum and ignores when the other tries to pull his fingers away, his hand curling hard over Will's and looking up at him from the small span of inches. The motion is hidden between their bodies. "These are my terms," Hannibal says, "Don't leave me behind."

Will shakes his head again, but his fingers don't slacken more. He's getting dizzy, and Hannibal is warm and there and breathing and telling him he doesn't want to be. And Will hates that he missed the intent, hates that he didn't jump back far enough, because his terms would be that Hannibal stays alive. He doesn't nod, doesn't give consent so much as give in. he's so tired and everything hurts. He tilts his head just enough to press their lips together, just enough, and when he pulls away the blood at the corner of Han's mouth isn't his.

It's only then when Will relaxes his resistance on a sob of anguish. His knife is not as sharp as Han's is, but when the other presses forward until they are chest to chest, it does the job. Han does not sigh or sob, but he hisses where only Will can hear, and then he's done. His own knife is sharper, and he must act before the strength leaves him.

"It's alright," he promises. "Lean against me."

He pulls his hand from between them and wraps it around Will's middle, and lifts his own blade - this is the expected end, the one the crowd gathers breath for, though they will not know the whole truth for some minutes now. It's alright, it's already irreversible. They cannot punish Han - they cannot take their signs from this. From the back, angling beneath the shoulder blade, he cannot hit the heart square, but at the depth of the handle, the blade can cut the aorta - and it is so sharp and his aim so carefully unerring that it's only the last nick that causes any pain.

By this point, Will doesn't care. His eyes are closed and breathing ragged, and the only thing anchoring him is his grip on Han's arm. He flinches just a little as the knife sinks deep but makes no more sounds. Too tired. Too upset by the fact that Hannibal won't live, won't be able to have a life just because Will ended his. He nuzzles against him with a sigh and feels his eyes grow too heavy to open again.

"I'm sorry," he tells Will, because he hadn't intended this - neither of them ever could have. Perhaps this was their punishment for asking so much of the gods, or payment for their many favors. Either way, this is how it ends. He is glad that it is at least with his arms around what little he owned in this life, and the rest - the answer the merchants seek, the anxiety of the last few days all fades away, their two injured hearts failing in sync.

End Notes

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